DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 863 FL 027 380

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| AUTHOR | Carter, Beverly-Anne |
| TITLE | Begin with Beliefs: Exploring the Relationship between Beliefs and Learner Autonomy among Advanced Students. |
| PUB DATE | 1999-00-00 |
| NOTE | 22p.; In: Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education: Contemporary Issues in Foreign and Second Language Learning and Teaching, Fall 1999, see FL 027 379. |
| PUB TYPE | Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160) |
| JOURNAL CIT | Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v4 n1 p1-20 Fall 1999 |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Advanced Students; College Students; French; Higher Education; Language Aptitude; Language Proficiency; Questionnaires; *Second Language Learning; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation |
| IDENTIFIERS | University of the West Indies (Trinidad) |

ABSTRACT

This study examined data elicited by the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which was administered to first-year, advanced learners of French at the University of the West Indies. The questionnaire looked at students' attitudes regarding the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and student motivation. Results indicated that most students agreed or strongly agreed that there existed a language-learning hierarchy of difficulty. No students felt that French was a very easy language to learn. Most students believed that everyone could learn a foreign language, and their self-esteem as language learners was high. The majority of students felt it was better to learn a second language in the country where it was spoken. They also considered vocabulary more important than grammar rules in learning a foreign language. Finally, 63 percent of students felt that successful communication with native speakers depended upon their ability to speak the language. Only 9 percent of the students endorsed the view that language teaching must embrace the utilitarian. (Contains 40 references.) (SM)

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# Begin With Beliefs:
# Exploring the Relationship Between Beliefs and Learner Autonomy Among Advanced Students

Beverly-Anne Carter

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# *Begin With Beliefs: Exploring the Relationship Between Beliefs and Learner Autonomy Among Advanced Students*

BEVERLY-ANNE CARTER

*The study of learner beliefs is an area of research that has been attracting considerable attention from researchers and practitioners engaged in promoting learner autonomy. The learners' readiness to assume active roles, as required by autonomous learning, is to some extent determined by the beliefs that they hold about foreign language learning. This paper examines the data elicited by the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) administered to first-year students in French at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. It is part of a larger Learner Autonomy Project that seeks to promote and integrate autonomous language learning into the foreign language syllabus at the St. Augustine campus. It looks at the beliefs held by students, as revealed by the BALLI questionnaire, and discusses the validity of these beliefs and how they are likely to facilitate or hinder the shift to a more autonomous mode of language learning.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1988) was administered to advanced learners of French as the first phase of an intervention to promote learner autonomy. The aim of the present study was to use the BALLI to discover the beliefs about language and language learning held by language majors and minors on their entry into the degree program at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

A survey conducted at the beginning of their tertiary level study was likely to reveal the beliefs that students brought to the program, beliefs that might facilitate or constrain the promotion of autonomy. Learner autonomy was considered to be an important goal of the French language program, for the dual approach of content learning and learning how to learn, as advocated in autonomous approaches, was one that was critically important to these undergraduates who were embarking on the final phase of their language learning in an institutional setting. Their need to develop both metacognitive and cognitive strategies in order

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to maximize present learning opportunities and to continue lifelong learning could not be overemphasized.

While the larger Learner Autonomy Project adopted a qualitative approach to record the process of shifting learners to a more self-directed way of learning, the use of the BALLI in this study enabled the teacher-researcher to take a "snapshot" of learner beliefs at a particular point in time. The strength of the instrument to capture the major beliefs among a group of learners is nonetheless balanced by an obvious limitation: namely, the validity problems inherent in questionnaire techniques (Christison and Krahnke, 1986). In a closed questionnaire, the answers selected by the subjects hinge on their interpretation of the categories; however, it is difficult for the researcher to probe further to verify meaning while administering the instrument. It is important to note that in this instance a preliminary analysis of the qualitative data—learner autobiographies and learner journals—seemed to support the data elicited by the BALLI.

The paper begins with a discussion of learner beliefs in the context of approaches to autonomy and briefly reviews the BALLI questionnaire and its use as the instrument in the study. Next, the paper analyzes the data obtained from the questionnaire and compares them to current research findings and, where appropriate, to the responses given by the subjects in the Horwitz (1988) study. The paper concludes by looking at the implications of the findings for the Learner Autonomy Project and for other projects where teachers aim to help students adopt a more reflective and autonomous approach to their learning.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Foreign language pedagogy is now able to draw on the growing number of studies that focus on the differences that learners bring to their language learning (Grotjahn, 1991). Studies on individual differences, motivation, and learner beliefs have all provided important insights into some hidden areas of the learner's affective background. The salience of learner beliefs to their language learning, for example, has been documented in several recent research studies (Wenden, 1987; Ho and Crookhall, 1995; Press, 1996; Cotterall, 1995; Broady, 1996). In her study conducted among ESL students, Wenden focused on the relationship between learner beliefs and strategy use, while, more recently, studies conducted by Ho & Crookhall and by Press looked at the question of ethnicity in relation to learner beliefs. Cotterall and Broady both examined learner beliefs in relation to autonomy.

Empirical data showing that learners' beliefs might influence

their potential for autonomy (see Cotterall, 1995) confirmed previous findings on the link between learner beliefs and learner autonomy. Wenden (1987), in making explicit the link between beliefs and autonomy, maintained that it was important to know learners' beliefs and strategies to determine the necessity of strategy training to help them self-direct their learning. Brown (1987), although not adopting an autonomy framework, also pointed to the role of affective factors in the acquisition of second or foreign languages.

> Understanding how human beings feel and respond and believe and value is an exceedingly important aspect of a theory of second language acquisition. (p. 101)

Researchers who advocate a learner-centered approach have given similar prominence to the role of learner beliefs in their theories of learning. According to Lambert and McCombs (1997), the first premise of the learner-centered model is that

> Learners have distinctive perspectives or frames of reference, contributed to by their history, their environment, their interests and goals, their beliefs, their ways of thinking, and the like. These must be attended to and respected if learners are to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning. (p. 9)

The similarities between autonomous approaches and learner-centered approaches extend to the learners' beliefs about the assumption of responsibility for their own learning. The learners' "representation" of their role in language learning is a factor that must be considered by proponents of learner autonomy. Holec (1980) argues that it might undermine the whole shift to autonomy if this were ignored, because the learner

> has very clear ideas of what a language is, what learning a language means, [and] of the respective roles of teacher and learner . . . (p. 41)

Littlewood (1998) contends that in spite of the variety of definitions of autonomy, they all have several central features, principally

> Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning can in any case only be carried out by students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education. (p. 71)

Littlewood's viewpoint that the assumption of individual responsibility is a core feature of autonomy is reflected in Benson (1997), who defines autonomy as

> a capacity—a construct of attitudes and abilities—which

> allows learners to take more responsibility for their learning. (p. 19)

Boud (1988, cited in Cotterall, 1995, p. 195) is another researcher who stresses the importance of individual responsibility.

> The main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction.

These researchers seem to suggest that success in learning (and this applies both to the younger and the more mature student) must be grounded in learners' active participation in the task of learning if learners are to become successful in their classroom-based foreign language learning. In other words, they are to become "active, goal-directed, self-regulating, and assume personal responsibility for contributing to their own learning" (Lambert and McCombs, 1998, p. 16). If foreign language teaching is to provide learners with not only content instruction but also knowledge of how to become a better and more successful language learner, then a good place to start is with a better understanding of what our learners believe.

## THE STUDY

This study, which used the BALLI in the context of a French as a foreign language classroom, first sought to analyze the beliefs of advanced learners in the light of recent L2 research and to compare the beliefs of the advanced learners in this study with the novice learners in the Horwitz (1988) study. Given the small number of participants, no generalizations beyond the context of this study can be made to other groups of advanced learners of French. (See Appendix A for a copy of the Learner Autonomy handout given to students.)

### The Instrument

Horwitz developed the BALLI in order to assess student beliefs on a number of topics related to language learning. The inventory was initially developed out of free-recall protocols of English as a Second Language (ESL) and Foreign Language (EFL) teacher educators and student-and-teacher focus groups in the United States (see Horwitz, 1988, for a fuller description of the research method). Horwitz subsequently refined the inventory to produce the final inventory of 34 items. Horwitz (1988) and Moore (1997) warn of one of the limitations of the instrument: Given the specific cultural context in which it was developed, it might prove to be of limited applicability in other cultural contexts.

Thirty of the 34 BALLI items were used in this study. The items omitted, Items 12, 18, and 21, were

felt to be less important for the purpose of our study. Item 15 of the original BALLI questionnaire was used in a subsequent open-ended questionnaire. There was also some rewording of the items to make them more culturally appropriate in terms of expression and standard British spelling. These changes, it is felt, did not affect in any significant way the data elicited, so that the study produced clusters of beliefs relating to the following categories: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation, as in the Horwitz study. Twenty-six of the 30 items used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strong agreement (1) to strong disagreement (5), with each statement. Two items elicited student ratings (the difficulty level of the L2 and the amount of time needed to learn a foreign language), while two items (an example of a language that is easy to learn and an example of a language that is difficult to learn) were open-ended. See Appendix A for the questionnaire.

**The Subjects**

The subjects in this study, first-year undergraduates in French, belonged to one of three groups (two day groups and one evening group) enrolled in the first-year, first-semester course F14A at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1997/8. The students were advanced learners who had had at least 7 years (approximately 500 contact hours) of prior instruction in French and Spanish at the secondary level.

Like their peers throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, these high school graduates gained admittance to the University of the West Indies on the basis of their Cambridge Advanced Level Examinations (in French and at least one other subject). The international examination is administered by the local Ministry of Education on behalf of the Cambridge Overseas Syndicate. Certification at the advanced level by the English-based board meets the matriculation requirements for the University of the West Indies.

Of the 38 students enrolled in the course, 35 (33 females and 2 males) completed the BALLI questionnaire. Six of the respondents were French majors, but one-half of the respondents were French/Spanish double majors (N=18). The remainder were majors in other Liberal Arts programs (Spanish, History, Linguistics, and Visual Arts). The respondents were between 17 and 45 years old.

**Procedure**

Although there was no focused discussion on learner beliefs before the BALLI questionnaires were distributed in class, the teacher-researcher did introduce

the topic of learner autonomy, and the class was given a handout explaining the general aims and objectives of the Learner Autonomy Project. The BALLI questionnaires were then distributed during class in Week 7 of the semester, 1 week after the midsemester test. An introductory page explained the rationale behind the questionnaire and gave instructions for its completion. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was about 20 minutes. In the remaining 30 or so minutes of instructional time, normal teaching/learning activities resumed. The same procedure was used in each of the three groups.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Difficulty of Language Learning

The items in this section address the difficulty of language learning in general, as well as any perceptions about the degree of difficulty of any named target language.

According to the responses given, 89% of the subjects either strongly agreed or agreed that there exists a language-learning hierarchy of difficulty (Item 3). Many languages, including German, Japanese, Finnish, and French, were cited as languages that are difficult to learn (Item 4). While only one student found French to be a very difficult language, 15 students, or 45% of the population, found that French was a difficult language, and an equal number considered it to be a language of medium difficulty (Item 6). No student felt that French was a very easy language. Two students gave no response to this item.

When asked to give an example of a language that was easy to learn, only one student suggested French, although, significantly, slightly more than half of the students (51%) said that Spanish was easy (Item 5). What these figures suggest is that these students, while not unwilling to enroll for a course of advanced French language study, nonetheless perceived that their task would be a difficult one, certainly more difficult than learning Spanish, the foreign language of choice at both the secondary and tertiary level. Interestingly though, notwithstanding the perceived difficulty of French, 86% of these advanced learners strongly agreed or agreed that they would ultimately learn to speak French very well (Item 30).

Students were also asked to report on the difficulty of individual skills. Only 14% agreed that it was easier to speak than to understand (Item 17); however, 83% agreed that it was easier to read than to write in the L2 (Item 22). Clearly, then, these students accepted the traditional divide between productive skills (speaking and writing), regarded as being more demanding, and the easier,

receptive skills of listening and reading.

There are mixed views in the literature about whether the distinctions easy/difficult and receptive/productive can be so sharply made. Recent research (Carrell, 1984; Dunkel, 1986; Nagle and Sanders, 1986; Weissenrieder, 1987; Grabe, 1991) has been challenging the long-held view that comprehension is an easy, passive activity, one that requires minimal attention and thus demands minimal practice by foreign language learners. Furthermore, in the case of these students, contrary to their stated belief about the ease of comprehension, classroom test results point to persistent difficulties among them, particularly in listening comprehension. It is possible that the students' beliefs about listening and reading led them to underestimate the effort needed to improve in listening and reading.

This perceived difference in difficulty might offer one explanation why listening and reading material provided for self-access study was so seldom used by the students. While the F14A teachers' perceptions of the students' weaknesses in listening and reading led them to provide self-access material for independent work on these two skills, the students' reluctance to pay further attention to listening and reading might stem in part from their beliefs about the lesser difficulty of the receptive skills. Interestingly, the students again expressed the opinion that they found writing and speaking more difficult than listening and reading in their course evaluations. The link between the students' beliefs and their lack of willingness to assume more responsibility for listening and reading is one issue that an intervention to promote autonomy might fruitfully address.

One area of considerable discrepancy between the Horwitz (1988) study and the group of advanced learners in this study was with respect to Item 29, which asked students to quantify the length of time needed to achieve mastery in French. Thirty out of 35 respondents, or 86%, felt that the length of time needed to learn a foreign language depended on the language and the person. This response contrasted sharply with those obtained in the Horwitz survey. In Horwitz, 38 beginning French students (N=97), or 39 %, felt that 1 hour a day of language learning would result in a high level of fluency after only 1 or 2 years. This time requirement was strongly rejected by the St. Augustine students. Only one student, 3% of the population surveyed, shared this view. Similarly, while 34 students, or 35% of the Horwitz sample, felt that it would take a learner 3 to 5 years to become fluent, only two students in this sample (6%) concurred. Importantly, although these students had a minimum of 7 years of foreign

language instruction, only one student (3%) felt that fluency could be achieved in 5 to 10 years.

The fact that the St. Augustine students saw language learning as an open-ended undertaking, with the length of time needed for fluency being an individual variable, suggests that the beliefs of these advanced learners, on this point, at least, are closer to the views held by language experts, many of whom consider language learning to be a life-long endeavor. Thus, we might hypothesize that the greater linguistic maturity of the St. Augustine sample reveals itself in a better awareness of the time necessary to achieve fluency in the target language. Without wishing to extrapolate too much from this single example, the author nonetheless suggests that some of the learners' naive beliefs about language learning can be modified through greater experience or awareness.

**Foreign Language Aptitude**

This cluster of items informs us whether students think that there is equal potential for achieving proficiency in L2 learning broadly distributed among the population in general or that particular learners are likely to be more successful than others, due to factors such as special language ability (Item 2), intelligence (Items 23 and 25), and gender (Item 16).

It is very positive to note, for example, that although the St. Augustine sample seems to appreciate the tenacity required to achieve mastery in a foreign language, their outlook is a very optimistic one, with 92% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that everyone can learn a foreign language. This answer seems to suggest that, in the view of the students, the capacity to acquire a second language, like the capacity to acquire a first language, is present in all human beings. This belief certainly seems to be true. In fact, in spite of the difficulty of classroom-based acquisition, particularly in foreign language contexts, more of the world's speakers are thought to be bilinguals rather than monolinguals (Cook, 1993).

When the students were asked to explore the subject further and asked whether some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn a foreign language (Item 2), more than half of the students, 66%, firmly believed (strongly agreed or agreed) this to be so. This perception that proficiency in foreign language learning is somehow a gift or a special talent is fairly widespread in the general population. Likewise, in the students' minds, language proficiency seems to be linked more with aptitude, the "specific cognitive qualities needed for SLA" (Ellis, 1985, p. 110), than with general intelligence.

Yet there seems to be no consensus about the link between in-

telligence and aptitude. Roughly equal percentages appeared across the range of the scale in response to the following statement: "People who speak more than one language are very intelligent" (Item 25); 35 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 32 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 32 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. The relationship between gender and language proficiency was not an area of beliefs that seemed to have been given much prior consideration by the students. Although only 2 of the 35 respondents were male (a reflection of the general trend in a society where language learning on the whole, and French learning in particular, are seen as female activities) and in spite of the fact that a number of researchers have underscored the differential use of strategies in relation to successful L2 learning among male and female learners, (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Bacon and Finnemann, 1992; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990), only 14% of the students felt that women learn a language easier than men.

The subjects were also asked to indicate their opinion about language learning in their country. The data elicited proved to be very revealing about the students' judgments about the state of language learning in Trinidad and Tobago. In stark contrast to the 92% who felt that everyone could learn a foreign language (Item 27), 69% expressed neutrality (neither agreed nor disagreed) when asked whether people in their country are good at learning foreign languages (Item 26). While this expression of neutrality might simply be a case of prudence on the part of the students who were hesitant to interpret "good at learning foreign languages," it is interesting to note that 69% of the population sampled disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement in Item 24, "People in Trinidad and Tobago place a lot of importance on learning foreign languages."

Even though the students' own self-esteem as language learners was very clear, with 86% believing that they will ultimately learn to speak French very well, the influence of the community at large—generally perceived as not gifted for language learning, even uninterested in language learning, and in short unsupportive of the demands of language learning—cannot be discounted in a study on the beliefs of undergraduate students. Richards and Lockhart (1994), in a discussion on learner belief systems, make reference to a study conducted by Tumposky (1991) to support the view that

> learners' beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude toward the language itself as well as toward language learning in general. (p. 52)

Tudor (1996) expands on the importance of the context on language learning in the following terms:

> Language learners . . . are not disincarnate spirits studying in a social vacuum . . . they are also members of a given sociocultural community, and their membership of this community is an integral part of their identity. . . . Their language study will be conducted within an educational framework which is shaped by the socioeconomic conditions of their home community and which will also reflect the attitudes, beliefs and conditions of this community. Contextual factors of this nature play a significant role in creating the learning environment in which language study will occur. (p. 128)

**The Nature of Language Learning and Learning and Communication Strategies**

The third and fourth categories of beliefs in the BALLI seek to ascertain the beliefs that learners hold about the nature of language learning and the kinds of learning and communication strategies that learners value. Since both these categories address similar issues, they will be treated together in this discussion.

The majority of students felt that it was better to learn the L2 in the country where it is spoken (Item 11). The fact that 89% of the students held this view should come as no surprise, since all but two of them had learned the L2 through a Communicative Language Teaching Approach where the focus had been on using language with French-speaking Caribbean people. Their communicative orientation perhaps explains why they assigned a very important role to vocabulary, and thus a rather minor role to grammar. In this study, 69% agreed or strongly agreed that vocabulary was the most important part of learning a foreign language (Item 13) and 72% disagreed with the statement that learning another language was mostly a matter of learning grammar rules (Item 20). Their communicative mindset can perhaps also be given as an explanation why 51% of those surveyed did not mind guessing when confronted with new words (Item 12), why only 23% felt that they should not say anything if they could not say it correctly (Item 9), why 94% saw the need for practicing to achieve fluency as a speaker of French (Item 14), and why 80% thought it was important to speak French with an excellent accent (Item 7).

The students' beliefs about vocabulary and grammar relate to one of the most controversial areas in the Communicative Language Teaching Approach. Earlier approaches to Communicative Language Teaching came into

prominence at a time when, according to McDonough and Shaw (1993), "structural design criteria started to receive widespread critical attention" (p. 22). The traditional focus on grammar or form shifted to a focus on meaning in keeping with the trend of the time that valued the meaning potential in L2 learning. As Maiguascha (1993, cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1996) in discussing the "marginal or ancillary role" (p. 24) played by vocabulary, states,

> The underlying assumption was that words and their meanings did not need to be taught explicitly since, it was claimed, learners will "pick up" vocabulary indirectly while engaged in grammatical and communicative activities or while reading. In short, lexical learning was seen as taking place automatically or unconsciously, as a cumulative by-product of other linguistic learning. (p. 24)

Grabe (1995) underscores the central role played by vocabulary when he states that "a large vocabulary is critical not only for reading but also for all L2 language skills, for academic performance, and for related background knowledge" (p. 3). A similar role is recognized for vocabulary in oral proficiency, according to Dickson (1996), who refers to an "internal survey" in which 66% of first-year students, and 58% of second- and third-year students cited their deficiencies in vocabulary as their main difficulty in oral expression.

Nonetheless, Kara (1993), in a classroom-based study of French language learners, reported that students wanted first grammar, then conversation, vocabulary, and finally translation. Davidheiser (1996) argued that because of the poor grammar mastery in their L1, "the teaching of grammar to American students of second languages seems difficult at best" and continued by pointing to the need for explicit grammar teaching to stem the "prolific mistakes in advanced courses" (p. 271). While Davidheiser examined students' perceptions and difficulties with grammar, Celce-Murcia (1991, cited in Manley, 1997) attributed some of the present dilemma surrounding grammar teaching to doubts among communicative language advocates about the utility of explicit grammar teaching:

> Among the proponents of this approach, there is currently some debate regarding the nature, extent, and type of grammar instruction or grammar awareness activities appropriate for second or foreign language learning as well as a certain ambivalence about issues as to whether, when, and how teachers should correct grammatical errors. (p. 73)

As these research studies have shown, there is ample evidence to support a major role for

vocabulary and grammar in language learning. In the context of learner autonomy and learner beliefs, the weight of one or the other in an instructional program often depends on their comparative usefulness in the eyes of the teacher and the learners. Gu (1996) perhaps summed up this contentious issue best when she wrote

> Students seemed to have their diverse criteria as to what was helpful or not helpful in the classroom. Those who believed that correctness and grammar should be the focus of instruction judged an activity by whether or not it involved some error correction or grammar learning. (p. 38)

By exploring their beliefs about language learning, students should become aware that a focus on grammar and a focus on vocabulary and meaning both share center stage in communicative approaches to language learning. Later approaches that emphasize a focus on form or on language awareness are simply endorsing a view expressed by Wilkins (1974) more than two decades ago, when he said he recognized the importance of grammar as a vehicle for communicative competence. Learner beliefs will therefore need to be modified if they are seen to reflect too reductionist a view of the kinds of activities that belong in the post-communicative classroom.

**Motivation**

The final cluster of answers to the BALLI sought to determine what opportunities students associated with learning a foreign language.

Whereas over half of the students (63%) felt that successful communication with native speakers was dependent on their ability to speak the language (Item 28), indicating an integrative need for foreign language learning, only 9%, or 3 out of 35 students, felt an instrumental need (Item 19). The latter group agreed that if they spoke French well it would help them get a job. Students' motivation in language learning, which lies at the core of a complex of affective factors, is something that practitioners considering an autonomous approach should be aware of. So much of L2 teaching at the present time in Trinidad and Tobago is premised on the notion that language teaching must emphasize the utilitarian. Yet, the evidence in the learners' responses to BALLI Items 19 and 28, which shows that only 9% of the learners endorse this view, should compel practitioners to reexamine this premise for classroom teaching.

## IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNER BELIEFS FOR AN AUTONOMOUS APPROACH: FROM BELIEFS TO AUTONOMY

The evidence is clear that learners in this study hold beliefs

that inform their attitudes towards foreign language learning. What then must be the next step in the promotion of autonomy? Raising student and teacher awareness about the existence of the above-mentioned beliefs should only be the initial stage in the promotion of autonomy. A second stage must seek to confirm those beliefs that might foster autonomy and change those beliefs that might prove deleterious to the promotion of autonomy. Accordingly, this section of the paper reviews the passage from erroneous beliefs to autonomy, with reference to three of the categories discussed in the BALLI: the difficulty of language learning (Category 1), foreign language aptitude (Category 2), and the nature of language learning (Category 3).

Little's (1991) reminder that autonomy "presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the content and process of his learning" (p. 4) offers a clue about how autonomy must be facilitated. Holec (1981), on the other hand, addresses the issue more squarely when he contends that autonomy is developmental, a "gradual process of acquiring," and that teachers will need to help learners free themselves from habits acquired in their past learning, while supporting their efforts to assume full responsibility for their learning.

Regarding the first category of beliefs, those pertaining to the difficulty of language learning, two options can be easily pursued to counter the beliefs held by the learners. First, students could be given strategic instructions to help them master those skills that they find most difficult. Learners who might lack the skills and strategies to communicate effectively would no doubt benefit from specific guidelines on how to improve their oral production. Such skills and strategies include the ability to paraphrase when faced with insufficient vocabulary, the communication strategies to keep a conversation going, and the ability to overcome any other performance difficulties that arise when interacting with native or other L2 speakers.

Another way in which the learning-to-learn focus of autonomy might be promoted is by helping these advanced learners to explore their belief that the productive skills are more challenging than the receptive skills. A clearer understanding of the role played by anxiety in language learning might allow learners to step back and analyze whether their beliefs about the ease or difficulty of different skills are in any way linked to the stress they feel when called upon to produce the target language, as opposed to responding to aural or written input.

In the category about beliefs about foreign language aptitude,

it might be a welcome boost to these advanced students to learn that there is mixed evidence on the superiority of child versus adult learners. Although there is strong support that children are more proficient at developing accents that are nearer to native-speaker accents, there is little conclusive evidence that, globally, children learn a foreign language better than adults. However, the importance of native-like accents for these learners cannot be discounted, since there is an overwhelming belief among them that it is important to speak French with a near-native accent.

While these advanced learners have clearly understood that translating from their L1 to the target language is not the most efficient way to attain foreign language proficiency (a belief dealt with under the category of the nature of language learning), their beliefs about the relationship of grammar and vocabulary to foreign language proficiency is some cause for concern. Whereas fluency might be a sufficient goal in contexts where French is learned for survival purposes, language majors should be more aware of the role played by grammar in increasing foreign language proficiency. It is possible to concede that even very proficient L2 speakers might contest the statement that learning another language is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules and that what is at issue here is not the students' perceptions, but a weak item in the questionnaire. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence, as well as course evaluation questionnaires, point to a deeply-held belief among many students that fluency is most important and accuracy secondary. Truly autonomous learners might not only hold to the belief of the primary importance of learning grammar rules, but also appreciate how irritating the lack of accuracy is to the educated native speaker of French and how important accuracy might be for the student wishing to make a career in a field that requires linguistic competence.

Moving learners from erroneous beliefs to autonomy must be a gradual process. If learners are to change their beliefs about what constitutes foreign language learning, their role in learning, and the most efficient way of learning, the fundamental changes cannot be the work of a lecture or two on autonomy, but a long-term process fully integrated into the range of skill acquisition during class activities.

## CONCLUSION

In investigating the beliefs held by the subjects, advanced students of French as a foreign language, this study revealed some fairly accurate and some ill-founded beliefs. It is the author's contention that the presence of these beliefs needs to be under-

stood and analyzed carefully if these learners are to be helped to achieve their full potential as advanced foreign languages learners.

Helping learners to reject their ill-founded beliefs about language and language learning and helping them not only to learn the target language but also to learn how to learn their L2—in short, helping them to become autonomous language learners—are fitting objectives at any level of instruction. An autonomous approach to foreign language learning is, to our mind, a useful framework to adopt at any level of instruction, but is particularly appropriate for the college level students in this study. The route to autonomy suggested in this paper could prove invaluable for these advanced learners who need every input to help them refine the skills necessary to achieve continued future foreign language success.

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## APPENDIX A

***(In the tables below, bold numbers indicate number of respondents in each category. The Likert scale ranges from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree)***

THE DIFFICULTY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Some languages are easier to learn than others. | **15** | **16** | **3** | **1** | **0** | |

4. Give an example of a language that you think is difficult to learn____

5. Give an example of a language that is easy to learn ____

6. French is:

i) a very difficult language,
ii) a difficult language,
iii) a language of medium difficulty,
iv) an easy language,
v) a very easy language to learn.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **15** | **15** | **2** | **0** | **2** |

17. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **4** | **11** | **11** | **8** |

22. It is easier to develop reading skills than writing skills in a foreign language.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **7** | **22** | **2** | **4** | **0** |

29. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?

i) less than a year
ii) 1-2 years
iii) 3-5 years
iv) 5-10years
v) it depends on the language and the person.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **1** | **2** | **1** | **30** |

30. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak French very well.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **25** | **5** | **3** | **0** | **2** |

FOREIGN LANGUAGE APTITUDE

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language. | **13** | **14** | **6** | **1** | **1** | |
| 2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn a foreign language. | **9** | **14** | **6** | **5** | **1** | |
| 10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. | **7** | **12** | **8** | **5** | **3** | |
| 16. Women learn a language easier than men. | **1** | **4** | **18** | **8** | **4** | |
| 23. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good in foreign languages. | **0** | **4** | **8** | **12** | **10** | **1** |
| 25. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent. | **3** | **9** | **11** | **6** | **5** | **1** |
| 26. People in Trinidad and Tobago are good at learning foreign languages. | **0** | **8** | **24** | **3** | **0** | |
| 27. Everyone can learn a foreign language. | **12** | **20** | **2** | **1** | **0** | |

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. It is necessary to know about France and francophone culture in order to speak French. | **3** | **15** | **6** | **11** | **0** | |
| 11. It is better to learn French in a French-speaking country. | **24** | **7** | **2** | **2** | **0** | |
| 13. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary. | **12** | **12** | **4** | **4** | **3** | |
| 18. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects. | **20** | **10** | **3** | **1** | **1** | |
| 20. Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules. | **1** | **6** | **2** | **22** | **4** | |
| 21. The most important part of learning French is learning how to translate from English. | **0** | **2** | **1** | **20** | **11** | **1** |

LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7. It is important to speak French with an excellent accent. | **12** | **16** | **3** | **4** | **0** | |
| 9. You shouldn't say anything in French unless you can say it correctly. | **6** | **2** | **0** | **19** | **8** | |
| 12. It is OK to guess if you don't know a word in French. | **1** | **17** | **7** | **6** | **4** | |
| 14. It is important to practice a lot in order to become a fluent speaker of French. | **33** | **2** | **0** | **0** | **0** | |
| 15. If you are allowed to get away with mistakes in the early stages it will be hard to get rid of them later. | **24** | **8** | **2** | **0** | **1** | |

MOTIVATION

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19. If students learn to speak French very well, it will help them get a job. | **1** | **10** | **16** | **5** | **3** | |
| 24. People in Trinidad and Tobago place a lot of importance on learning foreign languages. | **1** | **2** | **8** | **14** | **10** | |
| 28. It is necessary to speak their language in order to communicate successfully with native speakers. | **7** | **15** | **7** | **6** | **0** | |

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